

## **Big River site eyed to house state police**

**The governor says plans for a new headquarters in Cranston are not working out, prompting the administration to consider reservoir land in West Greenwich.**

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The Carcieri administration, after running into some obstacles to building a new, \$50-million headquarters for the Rhode Island State Police in Cranston, now wants to locate the building on 18 acres in West Greenwich. The parcel is part of the Big River Reservoir holdings designated only for drinking water and open space uses. The land, southwest of Exit 7 from Route 95, was condemned from its private owners in 1966 for a new reservoir. The reservoir was never built, but some predict it will be needed in the future. In the meantime, the General Assembly passed legislation stipulating that the land "should not be developed in any way."

The administration, saying it is pinned between soaring building costs and the lack of another suitable location, plans to ask the agency that manages the reservoir land, the Rhode Island Water Resources Board, during its monthly meeting at noon today to give up 18 acres of reservoir property for the state police. The administration also is scrambling to meet another deadline -- the end of the General Assembly's session in the next few weeks -- because the state police need the legislature to approve an exemption from the law mandating that the property be kept as open space.

The new plan emerged in presentations to subcommittees of the Water Resources Board in recent meetings. No public announcement was made. Draft copies of minutes to the meetings show concerns were raised about the environment and the danger of setting a precedent for developing lands that have been legally designated as protected for open space.

One subcommittee member, farmer William Stamp, was adamantly opposed. Stamp said the land was taken for use as a reservoir and there is no other place in Rhode Island to build one. The minutes quote him as saying, "In my heart I believe this is wrong. This is so inappropriate and the people here make it seem so easy and casual to do this." But one subcommittee, the board's Property Committee, voted to endorse the transfer of property to the state police. The 18 acres are at the edge of the 8,600-acre reservoir property -- an area that was to remain forested to protect the potential reservoir.

Minutes of one meeting quote a state planner as being encouraged because of "the active participation" of The Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society of Rhode Island participating in the process "almost from the very start." Participation doesn't mean support, according to Janet Coit, head of The Nature Conservancy's Rhode Island office.

A staff member was at the meeting, she said, after finding out about the proposal just a week earlier. "Nobody signed off," Coit said. "We're concerned about setting a precedent. It is always going to be easier 30 or 40 years from now to develop land that was designated open space. We need to look at more specifics." Eugenia Marks, of the Audubon Society, couldn't be reached for comment. Scott Wolf, executive director of Grow Smart Rhode Island, said yesterday that he was unaware of the proposal but his initial reaction was that building in West Greenwich "raises some concerns about the state subsidizing sprawl."

Voters approved a \$48-million bond issue in 2002 to build a new state police headquarters. It would replace buildings in Scituate that largely date to the 1930s. From the start, the state police said their highest goal was a more central location with good access to the interstate highways. As recently as last fall, state officials were focusing on a site in the Pastore Complex of state buildings on New London Avenue in Cranston.

Robert Brunelle, an associate director of the state Department of Administration, told the State Properties Committee in October that the site was best because it was close to the state's geographic center, it was next to the state prisons, and it would be on land already owned by the state. The state crime laboratories at the University of Rhode Island and the Health Department also would be consolidated into the headquarters building. Later, there were problems with the Cranston site, Jerome Williams, associate director of the Department of Administration, said yesterday. The state has been negotiating with no success to buy land from the adjoining Mulligan's Island Golf and Entertainment Complex. The state could condemn the property, but it is fearful of what the outcome would be in court, Williams said. In addition, Williams said there were concerns about traffic problems being created by construction of a new traffic tribunal building at the corner of Howard Avenue and Route 2. "You have to look at the unique needs of the agency coming forward," Williams said. "We did look at other sites in urban areas. We looked at the Cranston Street Armory. But seconds to the state police means so much and trying to get through traffic there was no good." Williams said design work continues on a building that could be located in West Greenwich or Cranston, so if the administration faces hurdles to its West Greenwich plans, it may still find a way to proceed in Cranston.

Jeff Neal, Carcieri's spokesman, said the governor feels the West Greenwich site is "a unique situation where the needs of the state police and their ability to enforce the law throughout Rhode Island happen to match a very specific site that is currently classified as open space. The governor does not foresee there will be any similar instances anytime in the foreseeable future." Neal said Carcieri was supportive of a \$42-million bond issue for open space last year and recently wrote the U.S. Senate to object to proposals to reduce tax incentives for property owners who conserve their land.

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